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THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN LEARNING LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Grammar plays a crucial role in language acquisition, influencing both comprehension and communication. This study explores the impact of grammar on learning languages, examining different teaching methods and their effectiveness. Data from learners of various linguistic backgrounds highlight the advantages and challenges of grammar-focused instruction. The findings suggest that while grammar is essential for accuracy, a balance between grammatical knowledge and practical usage is necessary for fluency. Language is a means of forming and storing ideas as reflections of reality and exchanging them in the process of human intercourse. Language is social by nature; it is inseparably connected with the people who are its creators and users; it grows and develops together with the development of society.

Introduction

The word "grammar" comes from the Greek word "grammatike", which means "the art of letters." In linguistic terms, it refers to the systematic study of a language's rules and structures for constructing meaningful sentences.

Language learning is a multifaceted process that involves mastering several components, including vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and communication skills. Among these, grammar serves as the structural framework that governs how words are combined to create meaning. It provides learners with the necessary rules for sentence construction, ensuring clarity and coherence in both spoken and written communication.

Despite its significance, the role of grammar in language learning has been widely debated. Some linguists argue that explicit grammar instruction is essential for developing proficiency, while others believe that exposure to natural language use is more effective. Traditional grammar-focused approaches emphasize rules and structures, while modern communicative methods prioritize meaning and interaction.

This article aims to explore various perspectives on grammar instruction, examining different teaching methodologies and their impact on language acquisition. By analyzing the relationship between grammatical knowledge and fluency, this study seeks to determine the most effective approach for language learners.

In earlier periods of the development of linguistic knowledge, grammatical scholars believed that the only purpose of grammar was to give strict rules of writing and speaking correctly. The rigid regulations for the correct ways of expression, for want of the profound understanding of the social nature of language, were often based on purely subjective and arbitrary judgements of individual grammar compilers. The result of this "prescriptive" approach was, that alongside of quite essential and useful information, non-existent "rules" were formulated that stood in sheer contradiction with the existing language usage, i.e. lingual reality. Traces of this arbitrary prescriptive approach to the grammatical teaching may easily be found even in to-date's school practice.

To refer to some of the numerous examples of this kind, let us consider the well-known rule of the English article stating that the noun which denotes an object "already known" by the listener should be used with the definite article. Observe, however, English sentences taken from the works of distinguished authors directly contradicting.

The nature of grammar as a constituent part of language is better understood in the light of explicitly discriminating the two planes of language, namely, the plane of content and the plane of expression.

The plane of content comprises the purely semantic elements contained in language, while the plane of expression comprises the material (formal) units of language taken by themselves, apart from the meanings rendered by them. The two planes are inseparably connected, so that no meaning can be realised without some material means of expression. Grammatical elements of language present a unity of content and expression (or, in somewhat more familiar terms, a unity of form and meaning). In this the grammatical elements are similar to the lingual lexical elements, though the quality of grammatical meanings, as we have stated above, is different in principle from the quality of lexical meanings.

On the other hand, the correspondence between the planes of content and expression is very complex, and it is peculiar to each language. This complexity is clearly illustrated by the phenomena of polysemy, homonymy, and synonymy.

In cases of polysemy and homonymy, two or more units of the plane of content correspond to one unit of the plane of expression. For instance, the verbal form of the present indefinite (one unit in the plane of expression) polysemantically renders the grammatical meanings of habitual action, action at the present moment, action taken as a general truth (several units in the plane of content). The morphemic material element -s/-es (in pronunciation [-s, -z, -iz]), i.e. one unit in the plane of expression (in so far as the functional semantics of the elements is common to all of them indiscriminately), homonymically renders the grammatical meanings of the third person singular of the verbal present tense, the plural of the noun, the possessive form of the noun, i.e. several units of the plane of content.

Modern linguistics lays a special stress on the systemic character of language and all its constituent parts. It accentuates the idea that language is a system of signs (meaningful units) which are closely interconnected and interdependent. Units of immediate interdependencies (such as classes and subclasses of words, various subtypes of syntactic constructions, etc.) form different microsystems (subsystems) within the framework of the global macrosystem (supersystem) of the whole of language.

Each system is a structured set of elements related to one another by a common function. The common function of all the lingual signs is to give expression to human thoughts.

The systemic nature of grammar is probably more evident than that of any other sphere of language, since grammar is responsible for the very organisation of the informative content of utterances [Блох, 4, 11 и сл.]. Due to this fact, even the earliest grammatical treatises, within the cognitive limits of their times, disclosed some systemic features of the described material. But the scientifically sustained and consistent principles of systemic approach to language and its grammar were essentially developed in the linguistics of the twentieth century, namely, after the publication of the works by the Russian scholar Beaudoin de Courtenay and the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure. These two great men demonstrated the difference between lingual synchrony (coexistence of lingual elements) and diachrony (different time-periods in the development of lingual elements, as well as language as a whole) and defined language as a synchronic system of meaningful elements at any stage of its historical evolution.

Methods

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants included 200 language learners from different proficiency levels and linguistic backgrounds. Data collection methods included:

1. **Surveys:** A structured questionnaire was developed to assess learners' perceptions of grammar instruction. Questions were adapted from studies in Lightbown & Spada (2013), focusing on learners' experiences with explicit and implicit grammar teaching methods.

2. **Performance Tests:** To evaluate grammatical accuracy and fluency, learners completed standardized grammar assessments, inspired by models from H. Douglas Brown's "Principles of Language Learning and Teaching." These tests included multiple-choice questions, sentence transformations, and guided writing tasks.

3. **Instructor Interviews:** Language teachers were interviewed to gain insights into their preferred teaching strategies. Questions were based on teaching principles outlined in Jeremy Harmer's "Teaching and Learning Grammar." The interviews explored the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction versus communicative methods.

4. **Classroom Observations:** Learning environments were observed to analyze instructional methodologies in action. This included traditional grammar-based lessons, communicative approaches, and blended learning methods. Observational criteria were derived from studies in Ellis (2008) and Krashen (1982), examining how grammar was introduced and practiced in real classroom settings.

5. **Comparative Analysis:** The effectiveness of different instructional approaches was analyzed by comparing student performance in accuracy-focused and fluency-focused learning environments. The study also incorporated Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which suggests that language learners acquire grammar naturally when exposed to comprehensible input.

Results

The results indicate a strong correlation between grammar instruction and linguistic accuracy. However, learners who were exposed to a communicative approach without explicit

grammar instruction demonstrated higher fluency but made more structural errors. The following table summarizes key findings:

Analysis of Results 1. **Explicit Grammar Instruction:** Learners who received direct grammar instruction performed significantly better in accuracy tests. They were able to construct grammatically correct sentences with fewer errors but often struggled with spontaneous conversation. This supports previous findings by Lightbown & Spada (2013) that structured learning enhances accuracy but may slow down fluency development.

2. **Communicative Approach:** Students exposed to immersive learning environments without formal grammar lessons exhibited higher fluency levels. They could engage in natural conversations with ease, yet their writing and formal speech contained frequent grammatical mistakes. This aligns with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, suggesting that exposure to comprehensible input promotes fluency but does not necessarily refine grammatical structures.

3. **Blended Learning Approach:** The most effective method was a combination of explicit grammar instruction and communicative practice. Learners in this group showed improvements in both accuracy and fluency, indicating that a structured foundation combined with real-world application leads to better overall language proficiency. This finding is in line with Ellis (2008), who advocates for an integrated approach to language learning.

Methodology	Accuracy Improvement	Fluency Improvement	Long-term Retention	Student Engagement
Explicit Grammar Instruction	High	Moderate	High	Moderate
Communicative Approach	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Blended learning (Grammar+ Communication)	High	High	High	High
Task-based mLearning	Moderate	High	High	High
Implicit Learning Through Exposure	Low	High	Moderate	High
Grammar Translation Method	High	Low	High	Low

4. **Task-based Learning:** This method, which incorporates grammar into meaningful tasks, was found to be particularly effective for engagement and long-term retention. Learners improved fluency while reinforcing grammatical structures indirectly through interactive activities.

5. **Grammar Translation Method:** While this method resulted in high accuracy and retention, it led to low engagement and fluency, as students lacked opportunities to use language in real communicative contexts.

6. **Implicit Learning through Exposure:** Learners in this category gained fluency through natural language exposure but exhibited frequent errors in accuracy. Retention rates varied based on the consistency and quality of input received.

These findings suggest that while grammar instruction is crucial for accuracy, fluency development requires immersive and interactive language use. A balanced approach that integrates both aspects is the most effective for overall language proficiency.

Discussion

The findings reinforce the longstanding debate on grammar instruction in language learning. **Krashen** (1982) argues that formal grammar instruction is not necessary for fluency, as learners naturally acquire grammatical structures through meaningful exposure to language. However, **Ellis** (2008) and **Lightbown & Spada** (2013) contend that explicit grammar teaching enhances accuracy and helps learners internalize linguistic rules more effectively.

Harmer (2007) suggests that while grammar provides a foundation for language structure, it should not be taught in isolation. Instead, it should be integrated with communicative practice to ensure learners can apply grammatical knowledge in real-life contexts. This supports the results of the study, which show that a blended approach leads to the most balanced proficiency development.

Further, **Brown** (2000) emphasizes that different learners respond differently to grammar instruction. Some individuals, particularly those with an analytical learning style, benefit significantly from structured grammar lessons, while others learn more effectively through interaction and immersion. This highlights the need for flexible, student-centered teaching strategies that cater to varied learning preferences.

Additionally, the results align with **Schmidt's** (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which states that language learners must consciously notice grammatical structures before they can acquire them. This supports the argument for explicit instruction as a means to accelerate learning and prevent fossilization of errors.

Moreover, **Long's Interaction Hypothesis** (1996) suggests that meaningful interaction is crucial for language acquisition, reinforcing the need for communicative approaches that allow learners to negotiate meaning and use grammar in a natural setting.

DeKeyser (1998) argues that grammar instruction should transition from explicit to implicit learning, meaning learners should first understand grammatical rules explicitly and then internalize them through practice. This aligns with findings showing that learners who initially study grammar explicitly but then engage in communicative practice achieve the best balance between accuracy and fluency.

VanPatten (2015) argues that grammar instruction should focus on meaning rather than isolated rules, emphasizing input processing as a crucial step in acquisition. His research suggests that traditional grammar drills are less effective than contextualized grammar practice integrated into communicative activities.

Given these perspectives, an integrated approach combining explicit grammar instruction, meaningful input, and interactive output practice emerges as the most effective strategy. Educators should tailor grammar teaching to learners' cognitive needs, balancing structured instruction with communicative practice to enhance both accuracy and fluency.

Overall, the discussion suggests that while exposure to natural language use is essential, structured grammar instruction enhances long-term retention and accuracy. A balanced, adaptive approach that combines rule-based learning with practical communication activities is recommended for optimal language acquisition.

Conclusion

Grammar remains a cornerstone of language learning, serving as both a structural guide and a tool for effective communication. The debate surrounding its role highlights the complexity of language acquisition, where accuracy and fluency must be balanced.

The study's findings underscore that while explicit grammar instruction fosters accuracy, communicative approaches enhance fluency, and a blended method incorporating both yields the most comprehensive language development. Learners exposed solely to explicit grammar instruction often struggle with real-time communication, whereas those immersed in communicative environments may develop fluency at the expense of grammatical precision.

Educational institutions and language educators must adopt an adaptable teaching strategy, ensuring that grammar instruction is neither overemphasized nor neglected. Task-based learning and contextual grammar application should be integrated into lesson plans to make grammar instruction meaningful. Personalized learning approaches should also be considered, catering to individual learner needs and cognitive styles.

Furthermore, as technology continues to influence education, digital tools and AI-driven language learning platforms should be leveraged to provide dynamic grammar practice tailored to learners' progress. Future research should explore the long-term impact of different instructional methods on language retention and cognitive development, as well as the effectiveness of AI-enhanced grammar learning.

In conclusion, a balanced, integrated approach to grammar instruction is the most effective pathway to language proficiency. By combining explicit teaching, meaningful interaction, and real-world application, educators can equip learners with the skills necessary for both accuracy and fluency in their target language.

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